

# 7

## Pedagogy for Autonomy as (Becoming-)Appropriate Methodology

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### **Appropriate methodology and autonomy**

Concerns regarding the inappropriate transfer of teaching methods and materials from Western to non-Western contexts have been frequently expressed in ELT circles in recent years (cf. Phillipson, 1992; Holliday, 1994; Pennycook, 1994; Canagarajah, 1999). In this climate of opinion, as the concept of learner autonomy has risen to prominence in mainstream ELT discourse some writers have been quick to draw attention to the dangers of its possible imposition on non-Western, particularly Asian contexts (for example, Ho and Crookall, 1995; Jones, 1995).

Mostly reports relating to the notion of 'appropriate methodology' have focused on critiquing the *inappropriate* transfer of particular methods or materials. However, some writers have presented alternative solutions for particular contexts, with adaptations of Western approaches or materials tending to be justified according to generalizations about national cultural characteristics (for example, Flowerdew, 1998). In relation to learner autonomy, also, some suggestions have been made for appropriate methodology on the basis of national stereotypes, with a particular focus on the supposed group-oriented tendencies of students in different Asian countries (for example, Farmer, 1994; Ho and Crookall, 1995; Jones, 1995). Others have seen research into national or regional learning styles as a key to the potential development of appropriate methodology (Oxford and Anderson, 1995; Littlewood, 1999). However, given the variety of types of social or cultural factor which impact on particular classrooms (cf. Holliday, 1994: 28–31), and possible dangers in this area of 'orientalism' (Said, 1978; Pennycook, 1998), such

generalizations or even 'hypotheses' derived from them (Littlewood, 1999) appear to represent an insufficient basis on which to develop appropriate local practices (cf. Smith, 1997, 2001). It is regrettable in this connection that, with only a few exceptions (notably, Holliday, 1994, 1997a; and Canagarajah, 1999, 2002a), there has been so little discussion of general principles which might inform the development of appropriate methodology by teachers, for their own contexts, without reference to a priori generalizations.

Criticisms relating specifically to the 'transfer' of the concept of autonomy to Asian contexts may tend additionally to reflect the misleading view that autonomy itself is a new method or that its promotion entails particular procedures. Rather, as stated in Little (1991) and as argued further in Aoki and Smith (1999), autonomy should more properly be seen as a possible educational goal, being a willingness and/or ability to take charge of one's own learning which learners may already possess or not possess in varying degrees. Thus, the promotion of autonomy does not entail the use of a particular method or technology. Instead, as Benson (2001: 107–78) illustrates, a wide variety of possible approaches can be envisaged. Following on from this, if learners in a particular context do not appear to respond well to a particular approach to developing autonomy, this – in itself – is no reason to assert that they lack autonomy or that the goal of autonomy is inappropriate: it might be the approach which needs to be criticized, not the students or the validity of autonomy itself.

In this chapter I wish to argue that one kind of approach to the classroom development of learner autonomy might – potentially – be more appropriate in non-Western contexts than others. I base this argument on my own experience with students in a Japanese university (reported on below) and on a distinction (see Figure 7.1) between two methodological tendencies, which I shall characterize here as 'weak' and 'strong' versions of pedagogy for learner autonomy.

'Weak' versions of pedagogy for autonomy, in this characterization, tend to view autonomy as a capacity which students currently lack (and so need 'training' towards), and/or identify it with a mode of learning (for example, self-access) which students need to be prepared for. The underlying assumptions tend to be that students are deficient in autonomy (and/or currently unable to make effective use of self-access resources), but that autonomy – as conceived in the mind of the teacher, syllabus designer and/or institution – is nevertheless a goal worth pursuing with them. The rationale for these assumptions, as well as guidance regarding the contents of instruction (the 'learning strategy

| Approach   | Goal  |
|--|---|
| <p><b>'Weak version':</b></p> <p>Awareness-raising ('training'/ 'preparation' for self-directed learning/learner autonomy)</p> <p>Learning strategy syllabus</p> <p>Presentation and practice of discrete 'good learning' strategies</p> | <p>→ Self-directed learning/learner autonomy (as envisaged by the teacher/syllabus/institution)</p>                   |
| <p><b>'Strong version':</b></p> <p>Exercise of students' own (partial) autonomy (via (partially) student-directed learning + reflection)</p> <p>Negotiated syllabus</p> <p>Experience of and reflection on student-directed learning</p> | <p>→ Awareness-raising (enhancement of student-directed learning/ development of students' own autonomy)</p> <p>←</p> |

Figure 7.1 'Weak' and 'strong' versions of pedagogy for learner autonomy

syllabus'), may tend to come from research into and/or beliefs regarding 'good language learners', or from a belief in the potential efficacy but current under-use or misuse of self-access facilities. Thus, instruction may tend to consist in presentation and practice of strategies which are considered, according to background research or other conceptualizations of 'good learners', preferable to students' current learning behaviours (cf. Holliday's 'approach A', in this volume). In sum, instruction tends to be based on a deficit model of students' present capacities, while autonomy is seen as a deferred goal and as a product of instruction rather than as something which students are currently ready to exercise directly.

A 'strong version' of pedagogy for learner autonomy, on the other hand, is based on the assumption that students are, to greater or lesser degrees, already autonomous, and already capable of exercising this capacity (cf. Holliday's 'approach C'). The methodological focus here is on co-creating with students optimal conditions for the exercise of their own autonomy, engaging them in reflection on the experience, and in this manner (rather than via transmission of a 'good learning' strategy syllabus), developing their capacities, which are then brought to bear in further exercise of learner autonomy. This could be described as an experiential approach (cf. Kenny, 1993) in the sense that awareness-raising is

based firmly on students' own experiences and insights. It is also developmental and 'process-oriented' (cf. Breen, 1984, 1987; Legutke and Thomas, 1991: 202–4) in that the goal is ongoing improvement of existing learning capacities, rather than delayed attainment of autonomy as a 'product' of instruction.

From the point of view of appropriate methodology, a weak version of pedagogy for autonomy, in which learning arrangements tend to be determined by the teacher, syllabus and/or institution rather than being negotiated with learners, can certainly be criticized. This version tends to be based on conceptualizations of 'good language learning' which are, ideally, relevant to students' own needs and priorities; however, the more distant the context(s) in which these conceptualizations were originally formed, the less appropriate they are likely to be. Thus, criticisms might justly be levelled against the export (if this is what is happening) of pre-packaged approaches, materials or technologies for developing learner autonomy from 'centre' to 'periphery' contexts. Strategy training approaches, learner training materials or self-access models which have been developed in Western countries might need to be particularly critiqued in this manner. As others have indicated (for example, Jones (1995) for self-access and Benson (1995) for learner training), these may run a grave risk of being ethnocentric and inappropriately imposed outside the contexts for which they were originally developed.

Rather than developing this kind of critique in new ways here, however, I wish to focus on a positive methodological alternative (the 'strong version' of pedagogy for autonomy identified above) and analyse what appears to have made it appropriate in one particular non-Western context. Below, then, I devote some space to describing in a concrete way how classroom-based negotiation of student-directed learning has shown itself to be feasible and apparently appropriate in my own practice in a Japanese university. I then derive some implications from this account of practice for the development of appropriate methodology by teachers more generally, and I conclude by considering the feasibility of this kind of approach in other contexts.

## **A 'strong version' of pedagogy for autonomy in practice**

### **Background**

The approach I shall describe was developed over a period of five years' teaching in a Japanese university, with seven separate classes of – on average – 35 to 40 undergraduate students each. These classes were all timetabled to meet for one and a half hours each week, for one academic

year (two semesters) in total. I took the first steps with classes of first year students majoring in a variety of languages other than English (see Smith (2001) for an account of my first year of experimentation). Subsequently I extended the approach to classes for English majors in their third and fourth years at the university.

Prior to this five-year period I had already taught for eight years in Japan, including four years in a full-time position at this particular university. Although I was clearly still an 'outsider' in not being Japanese myself, my growing familiarity with the context had given me certain 'insider' perceptions about students which served as a basis for the approach to be described. I was aware, for example, that: (i) most students in this particular university were well-motivated to study English, and already relatively proficient; (ii) however, they were generally worried that their abilities were in decline, since they only had two timetabled lessons per week of 'practical English', of which my own lesson was one; (iii) they tended to engage actively in and saw benefit in teacher-directed group work on relatively open-ended tasks and projects; and (iv) in common with other students I had taught in Japan, they were much more willing to express personal opinions and feelings via writing or private discussion than in open class discussion.

By this stage in my own development as a teacher in Japan I was actively seeking ways to make my teaching more appropriate to students' needs and concerns, and less dependent on methodological preconceptions and imported materials. In particular, I was conscious of a need to establish a connection between students' classroom learning and their lives outside the classroom, given that they themselves tended to see classroom learning as insufficient on its own even to maintain their current abilities in English (cf. (ii) above). I therefore hoped to build a connection with their out-of-class experience into my practice, initially by having students write about and share with each other their own goals and ideas for out-of-class English learning. On reading their reflections, I realized that students had various goals and preferences for improvement of their English and were far more active in attempting to learn English independently than I had expected (cf. Smith, 2001). This provided me with an initial rationale for then inviting students to make suggestions about classroom activities, again via writing, and then for provisionally suggesting that they could form groups around the different kinds of activity they had proposed.

Remembering this 'in tranquillity' at a remove of seven years, it is now quite difficult for me to recall the trepidation with which I took this first step towards student-directed classroom learning. I do remember

that I spent a lot of time worrying initially about whether students' plans would work in practice. I frequently intervened to suggest materials, offer sometimes very directive advice and generally retain some control over what groups were planning. Having arranged for extra rooms to be available for students with special equipment requirements (VTR, for example), I requested a short written report from each student each week, aware that I would no longer be able to monitor what students were doing all the time. Over the following weeks I visited each group several times per session and was relieved to observe that students were actively engaged 'on task', implementing their plans. Despite my worries, they did not object to continuing with this kind of work; indeed it continued for the whole of this first year (interspersed with occasional whole-class sessions), gaining strong votes of overall approval each time I offered a return to more conventional arrangements. I was encouraged, then, to adopt the same basic approach with different classes over the following four years, with similarly positive overall votes of approval but some modifications, as I shall detail below.

### **Some details of practice**

The following 'snapshot' of just one student-directed learning session (Figure 7.2), reconstructed from group plans and a video recording, can serve as an illustration of the variety of activities students in this context decided to engage in when allowed the freedom to plan activities for themselves (numbers of students in each group are in parentheses).

Over the five years during which I adopted this approach, groups of students engaged in a wide variety of types of activity, with a variety of goals. Activities ranged from the relatively product-oriented (such as transcribing taped radio broadcasts) to relatively process-focused (such as 'free conversation'). Sometimes students chose to focus on a particular skill using a particular type of material (for example, listening, using sitcoms they had recorded off air), sometimes they preferred to integrate skills (such as reading articles and discussing them, or interviewing international students around campus and subsequently writing a report). In 'receptive' work, students often chose to work with authentic materials and to devise their own tasks for using them, but they sometimes decided to engage in study using published learning materials (for instance, radio programmes recorded off-air, with accompanying purchased texts). In 'productive' mode, some students chose to engage in creative work such as individual fiction-writing combined with peer-response, writing poetry in groups or writing and

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <i>In the originally designated classroom:</i>  |  |
| <b>Topic discussion (4)</b><br>(they'll discuss 'living alone')   | <b>Free conversation (5)</b><br>(they'll talk about whatever comes into their heads)   |
| <b>Reading/discussion (7)</b><br>(they copied articles from <i>Newsweek</i> last week, and will discuss them today) | <b>Business English (5)</b><br>(they'll improvise a sales negotiation)   |
| <i>In the empty classroom next door:</i>  |  |
| <b>Debate/discussion (3)</b><br>(they'll debate the proposition 'Smoking should be banned')                         | <b>Watch TV drama (7)</b><br>(they'll help each other to understand an audio-recording one of them made of the video they watched together last week)  |
| <i>In an 'AV' room, some distance away:</i>   | <i>In my office (where there is a VTR):</i>  |
| <b>Movies (9)</b><br>(they'll continue to watch the movie <i>Seven</i> and then will discuss it)                    | <b>TV drama (with skit) (9)</b><br>(they'll share new words and phrases they noted down individually while watching last week, and will write an original skit using these words and phrases). |
| <i>In the library, or wherever else they want to work (they've arranged to see me at the end of the lesson):</i>    |  |
| <b>Individual writing activities (4)</b>  |  |

Figure 7.2 A 'snapshot' of student-directed classroom activities

subsequently performing rap songs; sometimes their work was more instrumentally focused, as in the 'Business English' group above. Thus, some activities which students found value in were what might be termed 'communicative', whereas others were relatively 'traditional'.

Classes met once a week over a total of about 28 weeks (about 14 weeks in each of the first and second semesters). This enabled the following cycle (Figure 7.3) related to out-of-class as well as inside-class learning to be repeated several – usually four to five – times in the course of a year.

This 'overall scheme' is an idealized and provisional one because it represents the end-point of five years of practice and was open to modification or indeed outright rejection during the course of each year with different groups of students, as I shall emphasize below. Although the basic overall approach was in fact supported by students over the course of five years, I introduced several modifications over time, in the light of

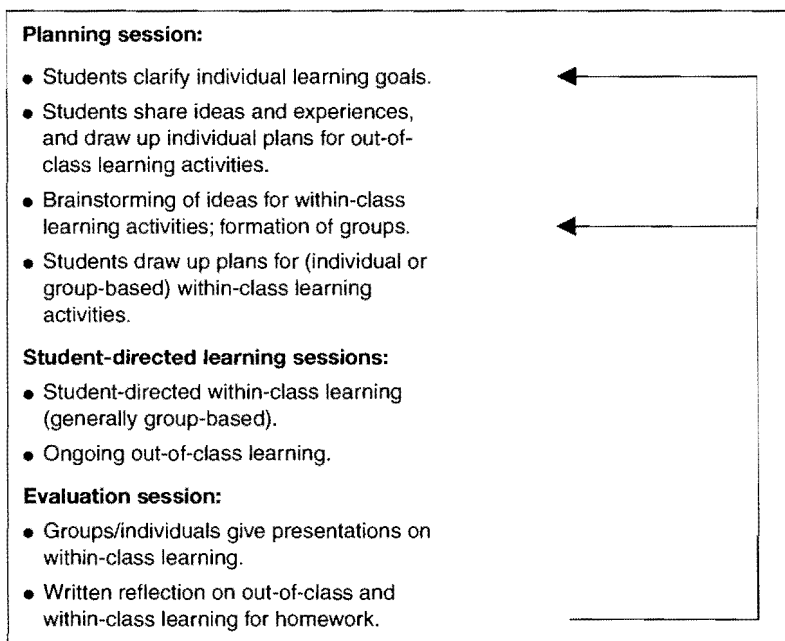


Figure 7.3 A 'student-directed learning cycle'

student feedback and my own developing sense of possibilities and needs in this context. Here are the most salient changes between the first and final years, in roughly chronological order. Some of these will be discussed further under the heading 'Becoming appropriate' below:

- increased initial explanation on my part of the rationale for and possible benefits of the approach;
- increased trust on my part that students could plan and learn for themselves, without my intervention;
- decreased recommendation on my part of particular 'communicative' learning materials or procedures; this led to an increased use of authentic materials (by some students) and 'traditional' procedures (by others), or a combination of the two (as in 'transcribing the news');
- relaxation of the requirement for individual student reports at the end of each session; instead, one member of the group wrote a short report each time;
- tightening of the planning-learning-evaluation cycle overall (i.e. increase in frequency of 'Planning' and 'Evaluation' sessions in



Figure 7.3, resulting in an average of three or four student-directed learning sessions between them);

- a more formalized structure for gathering evaluations as to the overall appropriateness of the approach (via end-of-semester assignments, and short reports at the end of each learning cycle, as indicated under 'Evaluation session' in Figure 7.3);
- increased activity on my part in 'interrogating' students as to what they were planning or doing and why, largely replacing advice to students as to what they 'should' do (particularly following the first learning cycle with each new class);
- a tightening of the planning-learning-evaluation cycle within groups (via a recommendation that groups should spend ten minutes at the end of each session collectively evaluating work that week and planning for the next session);
- relaxation of the requirement that groups needed to be formed: individual learning was also enabled (as shown in Figure 7.2);
- increased involvement of students in self-assessment for grades awarded at the end of the year.

In the light of concerns which I myself shared regarding the possible 'imposition' of a pedagogy for autonomy in this context, it is important to note that in the overall scheme (Figure 7.3), student-directed learning arrangements were open to rejection following initial experience of three or so sessions, and then, again, at the end of each subsequent learning cycle (the question mark in Figure 7.3 indicates that student-directed arrangements were always open to rejection at this stage). At the end of each learning cycle, I asked students to reflect on the experience in writing for homework, in response to the following questions: "Would you like to continue with similar [student-directed learning] arrangements in this class?", "If not, what kind of arrangements would you like to see?", and "If yes, how could arrangements be improved/ what kind of work would you like to do?" Apart from reading students' responses to these questions, I would confirm their opinions person-to-person as they wrote about and discussed individual learning goals and out-of-class learning plans at the beginning of the subsequent session (the 'Planning session' in Figure 7.3 above).

Although most students were always in favour of continuing with and improving on self-directed classroom work, two or three students in each class tended to be in favour of one form or another of whole-class instruction. With these students, I attempted to devote as much time as possible to understanding their objections to current arrangements.

Having talked to all students, I would then present my overall interpretation of the feedback I had received, making suggestions for improved arrangements on the basis of feedback received (without naming individuals). This was sometimes followed by more 'rounds' (during individual writing or pair/group discussion about issues relating to the organization of the class) where I consulted with students further about proposed arrangements, forming a view of the overall 'mood of the meeting', which I would then report back to all students. If it had been established that students – as a body – were content to continue with self-directed within-class learning, and once overall arrangements had been modified to take into account suggestions for improvement, students were invited to form (new) groups for the subsequent learning cycle. Thus, the overall scheme was both rejectable and modifiable, and all students' opinions were actively elicited and taken into account, not just those of the most vocal.

### **Becoming appropriate**

I shall now broaden the discussion to consider the above approach in relation to general criteria for appropriate methodology, taking into account also possible objections to its feasibility in other contexts and illustrating my argument with extracts from student evaluations (in block quotations below).

#### **From plausibility to appropriation**

As Holliday (1994) has implied, and as my own experience has confirmed (cf. Smith, 2001), provisional local insights may need to be seen as an essential prerequisite for the initial development of interventions intended to be appropriate, in contrast with the potentially orientalist national or regional stereotypes which are so often appealed to in discussions of appropriate methodology. Thus, I could justify the strong version of pedagogy for autonomy which I adopted in this setting as appropriate in terms of my provisional 'insider' knowledge of the students and context, in other words in terms of my own initial sense of its 'plausibility' (Prabhu, 1987: 106) in a context with which I had become relatively familiar (cf. 'Background' above).

By themselves, however, prior local insights may not be sufficient to justify a particular approach as 'appropriate'. After all, such insights are generally based on what students have already shown of themselves in response to, that is, within the confines of existing classroom arrangements. When classroom arrangements are changed, so too are students'

responses and behaviours, and this is one reason why a particular approach cannot be fixed in advance but must continue to 'become appropriate' (Holliday, 1994) in the light of students' and the teacher's changing perceptions of needs and possibilities.

For Holliday (1994), the role of continuing confirmation of appropriateness is taken on by ongoing 'ethnographic action research'. As I shall discuss below, this does seem to be an important principle. However, as Canagarajah (2002: 147) has implied, action research on the part of the teacher does not necessarily entail any transfer of 'ownership' of classroom work to students since opportunities for decision-making by students (enabling their 'appropriation' or, indeed, rejection of the approach) are not built-in. The teacher's perceptions of 'apparent suitability' remain the only, potentially fallible, measure of appropriateness in this case.

On the other hand, ongoing negotiation of classroom arrangements with students, where practicable, can provide valuable 'hard evidence' (or counter-evidence) of continuing appropriateness. Various connotations of the word 'appropriate' might be involved here, and highlighting these can show the need for 'appropriation' to be considered alongside 'apparent suitability' as a defining characteristic of appropriate methodology. In the above approach, as I have shown, students themselves determined the nature of classroom activities and had quite frequent opportunities, as a body, to reject or modify the overall scheme – in other words, it was '*given over*' to them. In practice it was also '*taken over*', since students in this context wanted to work further to improve it rather than rejecting it entirely:

For inside the class, I think we should keep doing the group work. At first, group work might not be effective, but I think that every time we get together, we think of different things to do and try to revise it to the better way, so I think the group work will eventually help us improve our English ability.

Each year, negotiation both of particular activities and of the overall scheme enabled classroom work to become appropriate in two further senses, in that activities were '*owned*' by and '*unique*' to the particular groups of students with whom the approach was implemented.<sup>1</sup>

In emphasizing the value of *appropriation* here, I would like to suggest that enhancement of student decision-making can be considered an important, hitherto relatively neglected principle in the development and subsequent justification of becoming-appropriate methodology,

since only this can ensure that a new classroom culture is *jointly* created with students. From this point of view, a strong version of pedagogy for autonomy can, in contrast with concerns about the inappropriate 'imposition' of autonomy in non-Western contexts, be seen as a kind of becoming-appropriate methodology par excellence.

### **Learner development**

The approach I have described appeared to be appropriate also in *effectively* improving students' English abilities and developing their autonomy. After an initial period of 'acculturation' (see "A 'cultural challenge'" below), students tended quite quickly to come to see the value of this approach, often expressing their appreciation of it in terms of its overall *efficiency* in coping with diverse needs and preferences in a large class context (cf. Smith, 2001):

Personally, I very much liked the way we had our 'Advanced English classes'. As intermediate English students, we differ very much in what areas we want to improve our English, and a class in which the teacher decides what to do and what materials to use would not be effective.

On a basis of trial and error students became increasingly able to develop what they perceived as effective means for developing their English abilities:

At first, we were puzzled what to do, but after a while, we could enjoy talking and tried to find better way to speak more and more. At first, I thought speaking was difficult and I was in tension, but recently, I can speak more relaxedly and I can enjoy speaking. I want to be able to speak more and more fluently, so I want to look for a better way to stimulate our talking.

In the light of some students' concerns as to whether they were really improving their abilities, one important overall modification in my practice was to place increasing emphasis on student self-evaluation, in the first instance by asking students to devote ten minutes at the end of each session to evaluating the session and planning the next one. I also began to feel less reluctant to interrupt student-directed work periodically to pose questions for reflection ("What have you been doing?", "Why?", "What has worked/not worked?", "Why/Why not?", "What

are you planning to do?", "Why?", and so on). Finally, I began to ask students to suggest grades for their own work at the end of each semester.

These moves towards a greater degree of self-evaluation by students increased, I believe, the overall efficacy of the approach, enhancing student reflection and control and helping me to 'trouble-shoot' more effectively on the basis of data I gathered. By the end of each course, most students seemed to end up feeling they had made significant progress towards reaching their goals:

We still have problems when expressing our thoughts in English, especially, when we began to talk in detail. However, I felt strongly that speaking ability has improved for everyone in the group. [...] I feel that I can do better in future, because now I see the problems of my English more clearly than the beginning of this course.

Just as importantly, perhaps, the approach did seem to be effective in developing students' overall ability to take charge of their learning. When asked what they had learned from the course, many students ended up expressing appreciation of this aspect in particular (cf. also Aoki and Smith, 1999: 25–6):

What I realized and learned most was that there were many ways to study English and it is me who should decide which way to choose and study. Besides, I felt the importance of having clear goal in studying. Without any particular goal, it is difficult to choose which way to go. At this point, I really learned a lot from this class. This experience must have given me an important lesson.

This way of class; thinking of the goal and the aim of studying English and making a study plan all by ourselves, gave us chance to consider what is need to be study each of us. And made us realize that learning English is our own desire and that the way of learning should be well considered by each of us.

To recap, in this section I have emphasized the apparent efficiency and effectiveness of the approach in meeting goals of improvement in English abilities and development of learner autonomy. After all, appropriate methodology – as with any educational intervention – must presumably be effective in 'moving students on' (in mutually approved directions), rather than simply 'remaining with' their prior abilities, thoughts and behaviours.

### Teacher development

A final argument in support of the appropriateness of this approach might be that the initially unfamiliar teacher role of 'mediator' or 'negotiator' seems to bring with it a *requirement* for the kind of ethnographic action research which is viewed by Holliday (1994) as crucial to the development of becoming-appropriate methodology more generally. My own initial and ongoing uncertainties about the appropriateness of the approach led me to investigate students' responses more actively and systematically than I had ever done before. I needed to assume an identity as a kind of 'ethnographer' of the unfamiliar, developing classroom culture both in order to support students in their self-directed work and as a basis for negotiation of the overall scheme (in other words, to find out what they felt about it, as described above). This requirement was also identified by one of my students, who described it perceptively in the following terms:

Teacher doesn't have to make the detailed lesson plan and talk during the whole lesson. It seems that it makes teacher easy to hold the class, but I don't really think so. As long as the teacher teaches in front of the whole class, he/she can expect what students are supposed to acquire through the lesson. It is because that the aim of the lesson is planned by teacher him/herself and students just follow it. But in this kind of class, aims are made by each student and they work separately according to their own aims. Grasping every student's aim and see how they are doing is rather difficult for teacher. He/she has to look students carefully to understand their ideas and give appropriate advice to them. I think it is important not to forget to make contact with students to see what they want to do next and how the plan improved.

Much of my time was spent in deliberately gathering data (from written student reports, ongoing observation, discussions with groups and individual students and final presentations), and my reflections on the insights I gained fed directly into suggestions I made for improvements in overall learning arrangements (making this 'ethnographic *action* research') as well as into more immediate interaction with groups and individual students. Thus, each cycle of student-directed learning in the overall scheme described above constituted at the same time a teacher action research cycle.

By engaging in the above approach, I gained a sense of being 'in control' of my own learning of teaching – in other words, I became less

dependent than previously on external insights into how I 'should' be teaching, much more in touch with students' priorities. I also felt that I was developing appropriate methodology because what I was doing reflected the needs which they had articulated. Thus, teaching these classes became a positive source of teaching-related learning for me: a resource, in other words, for the development of my own autonomy as a teacher. This corresponds well with Vieira's (1999: 155) observations that, through engagement in this kind of pedagogy, "Teaching becomes a sort of research, and research becomes a way of teaching. Teachers, as learners, become involved in a process of autonomization, thus feeling more empowered to take charge of their own course of action." In other words, (ethnographic) action research needs to be engaged in when a strong version of pedagogy for autonomy is adopted. Adopting this kind of approach can, then, serve as a particularly convenient basis for developing appropriate methodology.

### A 'cultural challenge'

Despite the positive arguments outlined above, there is no denying that the changes in teacher and student roles which accompany this kind of approach tend to counter conventional expectations, representing a challenge to established norms of classroom culture in most institutional learning contexts, Western or non-Western. It is necessary to recognize that in many settings students may appear reluctant, at least initially, to take on greater control over classroom learning. Additionally, when students *are* willing to engage in this kind of approach, teachers' freedom to innovate may itself be or appear to be constrained by a lack of autonomy with regard to institutional requirements and/or the expectations of stakeholders such as parents, other teachers or administrative authorities.

I have become more conscious of such constraints myself since moving back to the UK, where I now teach in a much more 'accountable' university setting. With hindsight I can see that a very important factor facilitating the approach I have described in this chapter was the relative freedom I had as a teacher in Japan to engage in experimentation involving student decision-making. As in many other Japanese universities, teachers in this setting have considerable freedom to design their own courses: apart from needing to specify overall objectives and contents in very general terms for a prospectus, teach at a particular time each week and submit overall grades for students at the end of the year, I had sole responsibility, and was therefore free to negotiate control with

students, in many areas, including evaluation procedures, without being clearly accountable to 'stakeholders' other than the students themselves. This is not so clearly the case in my present teaching context (where there are various departmental and institutional constraints on course planning and evaluation) and is unlikely to be true in many settings.

Since I am still struggling to identify 'spaces of freedom' for the development of learner autonomy in my own current teaching situation (cf. Smith and Barfield, 2001), I wish to avoid suggesting that a strong version of pedagogy can or should be implemented to the same degree in more 'difficult' circumstances than those I have described above. However, in general terms, I would suggest on the basis of my experience in Japan that it is, perhaps, only by attempting to engage in negotiation, in other words by challenging previously accepted classroom norms, that individual teachers can identify what the 'real' external constraints on this kind of practice are, and what is in fact feasible and appropriate.

If teachers are willing to engage in innovation of this kind, negotiation is likely – on the one hand – to involve a requirement for 'cultural continuity', as recommended by Holliday (1997a). Viable negotiation strategies will vary in different settings, and an important role for the teacher engaged in this kind of practice is to develop workable local forms of classroom democracy, since, as Breen and Littlejohn (2000: 281) have emphasized, "Much [...] would appear to depend on *how* negotiated work is approached, rather than on a general factor of appropriacy or otherwise [of negotiated work] to specific cultural contexts." On the other hand, as I have already implied above, appropriateness cannot be seen just as a matter of 'fitting in' with established norms – education can only ever take students in new directions. A strong version of pedagogy for autonomy which is developed jointly by the teacher and students involves neither 'cultural imposition' nor complete 'cultural continuity'. Rather, it involves what might be termed a 'cultural challenge': negotiation inevitably takes the teacher, students and the emerging classroom culture in unaccustomed directions which are nevertheless appropriate because they are *jointly created* within the limits of what proves to be feasible and acceptable in a particular context.

Finally, if this kind of cultural challenge is to be managed in a context-sensitive manner it may be necessary for the teacher to provide "firm insurances of security" (Holliday, 1994: 187) even as the classroom becomes more decentralized. For example, an overall scheme compara-



ble to the one I have described might reassure students that self-directed work is regularly open to rejection or renegotiation while allowing the teacher opportunities to re-establish a more familiar kind of authority if this seems necessary.

## Conclusion

A strong version of pedagogy for autonomy, as exemplified in this chapter, is likely to challenge both the teacher's and students' preconceptions about classroom behaviour and, for this reason alone, may seem difficult to implement ('inappropriate' in one sense of the term) in many contexts. However, if culturally sensitive and 'secure' mechanisms for negotiation are evolved, this kind of approach can result in enhanced classroom participation and motivation, giving the lie to stereotypes about 'passive' learners. In such circumstances, far from autonomy being inappropriate for general cultural reasons, a strong version of pedagogy for autonomy, where practicable, offers opportunities to connect classroom learning with students' lives outside the classroom, enabling them to become more active in engaging and developing their own learning styles and strategies in ways which *they* find appropriate. Involving as it does an ongoing requirement for ethnographic action research on the part of the teacher, the approach can also help him/her to learn with and from students, and thus move beyond a priori stereotypes and attachments to 'method'.

Although there might be difficulties in implementing this kind of approach in other (including Western) contexts, it seems important to re-emphasize finally that it has proved feasible in one large class, non-Western setting. As Crabbe (1999: 7) remarks, "The fact that the autonomy of language learning is understood and accepted in a given cultural context is sufficient counter to any categorical claim of general cultural inappropriateness in that context." Beyond this, however, it is acceptance or rejection by students of a particular *approach* to developing autonomy which is the issue I have been emphasizing here. The approach I have described, being based on what students themselves brought to the classroom and offering them ample opportunities for rejection or modification, has proved to be popular and apparently successful in one 'Asian' setting. This suggests that it is important to look elsewhere than to national or regional cultural characteristics in the future (for example, to institutional constraints and opportunities, students' previous learning experiences, teachers' degree of readiness, and, importantly, the degree of control students have over the approach

'offered' to them) for explanations of the appropriateness or otherwise of different pedagogies for autonomy in classroom contexts around the world.

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## **Reflection/discussion questions**

1. What might be 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' about some approaches to developing learner autonomy you are familiar with, in a classroom context known to you?
2. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the argument above that 'a strong version of pedagogy for autonomy can [...] be seen as a kind of becoming-appropriate methodology par excellence'?
3. What factors might constrain the implementation of a relatively 'strong' version of pedagogy for autonomy, in a context with which you are familiar? How could some classroom arrangements nevertheless be negotiated with students, in a culturally sensitive fashion?

## **Note**

1. The connotations of 'appropriate' identified here ('apparently suited (to)', 'given over (to)', 'taken over (by)', 'unique (to)' and 'owned (by)') are abstracted from definitions in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.